



SASSAFRAS

By COLEEN VANSANT, Alabama Forestry Commission

CALLED Green Stick by the American Indians because of its bright green twigs, Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum* (Nutt.) Nees.) is one of the most widely known and recognized trees of the South, not because of its physical characteristics but because of the folklore surrounding its aromatic smell and taste. During Colonial days a "spring tonic" was brewed from the roots and twigs, which sold on the market for 7 or 8 cents a pint under the name of "sassafras tea." Throughout the South during this same period, the country people made a beer by boiling the twigs in water. To this infusion molasses was added and the whole mixture allowed to ferment. In Louisiana the crushed dry leaves were used to thicken pottage. Because of its medicinal virtues it was one of the first American plants to be introduced into Europe.

Today, oil of sassafras, (which is distilled from the bark, roots, and twigs), is used in the manufacture of flavoring extracts, scented soaps, and perfumes and in the preparation of certain pharmaceutical compounds. The sole ingredient for the spice filè, used in gumbo, is pow-



dered sassafras leaves.

The sassafras tree may reach heights of 60 feet and diameters of 1-3 feet but usually is shorter and hardly more than a shrub. In the South it can grow to 100 feet tall. It is a tenacious tree that can survive fire and sprouts readily. The warm brown bark of older trees is deeply furrowed.

The sassafras leaves are deciduous, 4-6 inches long, and may be entire (not lobed), two lobed (mitten), or three

lobed on the same branch or tree. In autumn, leaves turn yellow, crimson and a rich orange.

The fruit ripens in September and October, with a dark blue berry-like, thin, fleshy covering over the hard seed. Each fruit is borne on a stalk 1 1/2 to 2 inches long. The fruit is eaten in early fall by deer, turkey, bear, and many species of birds including quail.

Sassafras prefers dry sandy soils, usually in association with other species. It is commonly found along fence rows and in abandoned fields. In the South, it is a part of the montane flora and in the Southern Appalachians it ascends mountain slopes up to 4,000 feet.

Sassafras is a small genus that includes only three species of deciduous trees in the world. One is found in China, one in Formosa (Taiwan), and the other is widely distributed throughout the eastern and southern U.S. from Maine to Iowa and south to Florida and Texas.

Sassafras wood is aromatic, soft, weak and brittle. Aside from its oils and historical uses, it is primarily used for pulp, fence posts, slack cooperage crafting, and small, open fishing boats. 🌲



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